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ABSTRACT

This study explored the dimensional structure of mentoring and other support behaviors that occur naturally among teachers in elementary school settings and contrasted the support networks of female and male teachers. A Teacher Support Behavior Survey (TSBS) was developed based on the content of 512 interviews with elementary teachers on their daily interactions and on a survey that had been used with university professors. The TSBS included 33 statements asking teachers to indicate whether or not they had engaged in certain supportive activities. A Survey of Organizational Communications: Elementary School was also administered. A statewide random sample of 750 elementary teachers received the instruments of which a total of 517 were returned and used in the study. Due to the extremely high proportion of female teachers responding (94 percent), a second mailing went out to 400 male elementary teachers of whom 313 returned usable questionnaires. Six separate factors emerged as dimensions of support among female teachers while eight factors emerged as aspects of male teachers' networks. The results of the study support the notion that informal, multidimensional communication support behaviors operate within elementary schools apart from formalized mentoring programs and that these have a more positive and lasting effect on female than on male teachers. Among female teachers, a network of individuals tends to provide a variety of types of support, functions are less discrete, and the line between personal, social, and professional relationships is blurred. Among male teachers, more individuals are potentially included in the support network and each may serve a more specific function. (Contains 17 references.) (JB)

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Mentoring and Support Networks in Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

We explored the dimensional structure of mentoring and other support behaviors that occur naturally among teachers in elementary school settings and contrast the support networks of female and male teachers. Six separate factors emerged as dimensions of support among female teachers while eight factors emerged as aspects of male teachers' networks. Supportive adult relationships, whether current or in the past, had a more significant impact on female teachers' support behaviors than on male teachers' networks.

Mentoring and Support Networks in Elementary Schools

Objectives:

Early research on supportive relationships has made little progress in the understanding of and empirical support for the factors comprising the broad construct of communication support behavior among elementary teachers. Further, existing research is often limited to general elementary school teaching populations, which are predominantly female. The purpose of these studies was to empirically examine mentoring and other support behaviors among teachers in the elementary school setting to determine their various dimensions. Further, it sought to compare the support networks among female teachers with those identified among male teachers.

Background:

Affiliation, or supportive relationships in the workplace, has been identified as a persistent and significant concern among employees. In a recent Gallup Poll, 1200 workers ranked supportive relationships at work as among the ten strongest motivational factors, higher than money and status (in Schuman, 1987). Among teachers, affiliation is especially important. Little (1982) pointed out that elementary teachers have high expectations of collegiality and that one of the main ways teachers characterize their buildings is if faculty are "close" and routinely "work" together.

Elementary teachers in particular may feel isolated because they lack the peer relationships enjoyed by many secondary school teachers as members of academic departments. Benefits of affiliation include socialization (Kremer-Hazon & Ben-Peretz, 1986); an increase in sense of efficacy (Newman, Rutler & Smith, 1989); professional growth (Rosenholtz, Bassler & Hoover-Dempsey, 1986); and enhanced awareness of resources, ideas, and skills (Reich, 1986). When teachers are unable or unwilling to interact, problems occur. Poor professional self image and low job satisfaction (Friesen, Prokop & Sorros, 1988) are frequently cited as major reasons for teachers leaving the profession (Alexander, Adams & Martray, 1983; Lortie, 1975).

Although teacher affiliation has widespread support (especially today through mentoring programs), the dimensions of these support behaviors have not been extensively researched. In business and industry, however, support behaviors among workers have been well researched and suggest that affiliation takes on a variety of faces and functions. Several models describing affiliation relationships, their purposes, benefits, and limitations have been presented. Shapiro, Haseltine,

and Rowe (1978) describe a hierarchical continuum of collegiality in business occupations from a paternalistic "mentor" relationship to a strong but not powerful "sponsor" relationship, a "guide" who orients the worker to the system, and a "peer pal" relationship in which colleagues of equal rank help each other succeed. Among business professionals and university professors, a four dimensional model of support relationships has been proposed: the traditional "mentor/protege" relationship; a "collegial social" reciprocal and somewhat socially oriented dimension; a "collegial task" working relationship; and a "teacher/coach" factor focused on transmitting the informal rules and politics of the organization (Hill, Bahniuk, Dobos & Rouner, 1989; Bahniuk, Dobos & Hill, 1990). A model of support relationships among peers in business was identified by Kram and Isabella (1985) as a continuum of information peers, collegial peers, and special peers.

Zahorik (1987) pointed out the need to know more about teacher interactions as they occur naturally on a daily basis in schools. Specifically, some contend that elementary schools are a lonely and hostile workplace for male teachers, which discourages males from entering or remaining in teaching positions (Tracz, Lee, Burch & Monke, 1992). Just as more needs to be understood about the female experience in business and industry (Kram & Isabella, 1985), the experience of male teachers in elementary classrooms needs further examination.

Methods and Sample:

These studies sought to identify and describe the naturally occurring support behaviors among male and female elementary teachers. A Teacher Support Behavior Survey (TSBS) was developed based on the content of 512 interviews with elementary teachers about their daily interactions (Bainer & Didham, 1991) and on a survey used by Hill et. al. (1989) with university professors. The TSBS included 33 statements asking teachers to indicate whether or not they had engaged in certain supportive activities. Demographic information was also collected. A second instrument, the Survey of Organizational Communications: Elementary School (SOC-ES), contained 17 Likert-type questions seeking quantitative data about a range of communication support behaviors based on a validated version of DeWine, James and Walence's survey (1985). For a more complete discussion of the development and validation of these instruments, see Bainer and Didham (1993).

The instruments were administered to a statewide random sample of 750 elementary teachers. A total of 517 (69%) questionnaires were returned and entered in the data analysis. Principal component analysis with iterations was used to identify meaningful dimensions of support behaviors among teachers. The factor

analysis was performed with varimax, an oblique rotation offered in the SAS package. Reliability estimates using coefficient alpha were computed for each factor. As one internal validity check, respondents were classified into two groups: those who stated that they have a mentor-like relationship and those who stated that they have never had such a relationship. One-tailed t-tests compared the responses of teachers in these two groups for each factor. Because having a mentor is likely to be accompanied by receiving more information, a second validation assessed the correlation between factors and the sending and receiving portions of the SOC-ES instrument. ANOVA was used to perform discriminate analysis to identify main effects and interaction effects between each factor and population variables (ie, gender, years of experience, involvement in a mentoring program).

While the data was useful in identifying support networks among teachers and in validating the TSBS, 488 (94%) of the respondents in the initial study were female teachers. A significant difference ($p<.005$) was found between the profiles of male and female teachers, females scoring higher on social relationship factors. Rasch analysis of the data confirmed that there were two distinct definitions of the "support" variable; that is, that there was a significant difference between the way male and female teachers prioritized the items on the instrument. These interaction effects called for further, more rigorous analysis. Therefore, a second mailing was sent to a statewide random sample of 400 male elementary teachers. A total of 313 (78%) questionnaires were returned and entered into a second factor analysis.

Results and Conclusions:

For female teachers, factor analysis suggested a six dimensional factor solution and accounted for 51.8% of the variance. The factors were labeled according to the function they served: mentoring, supporting, collaborating, career strategizing, supervising, and grounding (Table 1). Items which clustered strongly in "mentoring" seem to represent many of the behaviors and non-reciprocal activities associated with the traditional mentoring role: advocating, providing professional opportunities and visibility, sharing personal and professional coping strategies. The "supporting" factor included items suggesting a mutual support relationship that provides for an exchange of social and personal information at both meaningful and superficial levels. Items included in this factor also suggest emotional support including confirmation, personal feedback, and friendship. In the "collaborating" factor were items suggesting sharing and collaboration among colleagues to more effectively fulfill professional responsibilities and to address student needs and school-related problems. A range of collaborative behaviors is suggested, including

superficial and spontaneous sharing of materials, ideas, and compliments to persistent and more thoughtful collaboration to solve problems and coordinate schedules. The "career strategizing" factor included non-recriprocal support behaviors that provided some recognition and responsibility within the school community. "Supervising" as a factor included non-reciprocal behaviors of receiving solicited and unsolicited criticism. Finally, "grounding" provided "insider information" that is often political and important to career development.

Factor analysis of the male teacher data suggested an eight dimensional factor solution and accounted for 57.6% of the variance. (Table 2). The factors were labeled according to the function they served and to their similarity to factors suggested in the previous, predominantly female study. Generally, the factors identified in the male data were more discrete and easier described than those presented in the factor analysis of the female data.

While the female data showed one "mentoring" factor that was much broader than the traditional definition of mentoring, the male data separated traditional aspects of mentoring as discrete factors. Males clustered more items related to professional success identified as "grounding" than did females; items typically related to understanding how to influence others and to function within the organizational structure. "Grounding" behaviors include providing "insider information" that is often political and important to career development. Males also differentiated between a "peer mentoring" factor, in which colleagues take action on the teacher's behalf, and an "advocating" factor in which a superior or influential person fills a more traditional mentoring role by providing opportunities and visibility in a variety of social and professional settings. Further, the male data contained a "modelling" factor in which the teacher had a clear role model to emulate.

The "supporting" factor was more focused and perhaps deeper in the male study than was the "supporting" factor for females. Missing were items that suggested somewhat superficial social behaviors such as sharing school and community news, spending extra time together, and defending each other. Items loading on "support" for males were limited to those suggesting an emotionally intimate, reciprocal relationship with clear psychological benefits. Items identifying the exchange of constructive criticism as well as thanks and positive evaluations suggest an honest, personal social relationship. "Collaborating" for males focused strongly on collaboration for professional development and to fulfill professional responsibilities related to student outcomes and programs. Sharing materials, ideals, and positive feedback were not part of this collaboration for males,

but did appear in the female data. Instead, the male data contained a discrete "sharing" factor which included sharing materials and ideas, local and school news, and responsibilities by "covering" for each other. The "supervising" factor was similar for the male and female data sets, although the male factor was less directive and included communication with the supervisor regarding decisions and conflicts.

T-tests comparing the responses of female teachers with and without supportive adult relationships showed that those with supportive relationships scored significantly higher ($p < .001$) than teachers without a supportive relationship on all factors except supervising (Table 3). Similarly, female teachers who could identify a supportive relationship in the past had significantly higher mean scores ($p < .001$) on all factors except supervising than did those who could not identify a supportive past relationship (Table 4). This suggests that a supportive adult relationship currently or in the past had a significant and lasting positive impact on female teachers.

In contrast, t-tests comparing the responses of male teachers currently with and without a supportive adult relationship showed that those who could identify a supportive relationship scored significantly higher ($p < .001$) on the grounding, collaborating, peer mentoring, advocating, supervising, and modelling factors. There was no significant difference in the scores between male teachers with and without a current a supportive adult relationship for the supporting and sharing factors (Table 5). Further, male teachers who could identify a supportive adult relationship in the past scored significantly higher than those who lacked a past supportive relationship on only two factors, grounding and advocating. There was no significant difference between their responses on the other six factors (Table 6). This suggests that while a past supportive relationship had little impact on psychological and professional aspects of teaching for male teachers, that relationship had a lasting impact on factors associated with career success and mobility (grounding and advocating). While male teachers with a current supportive relationship experienced many professional and career-related benefits, neither intimate psychological interactions nor casual sharing of news, time, and ideas were impacted by the presence or absence of a supportive relationship.

The results of this study support the notion that informal, multidimensional communication support behaviors operate within elementary schools apart from formalized mentoring programs and that these have a more positive and lasting effect on female than male teachers. Further, this study suggests that the informal support network is more expansive for males than for females. With female teachers, a network of individuals tends to provide a variety of types of support, functions are

less discrete, and the line between personal, social, and professional relationships is blurred. Among male teachers, more individuals are potentially included in the support network and each may serve a more specific function. Personal, professional, and social functions are distinct and not necessarily provided by the same individual. The multiple dimensions of support identified for both genders attest to a decentralization of support in elementary school settings, especially among male teachers. This is dissimilar to the support obtained from the traditionally exclusive mentoring relationships in business and higher education. This study confirms that many dimensions of support behaviors are important in the peer-oriented elementary school setting.

Significance:

Conceiving of informal communication networks with multiple dimensions of support should stimulate and focus the study of mentoring and peer relationships in elementary school settings. That is, these studies indicate that if mentoring programs are formalized, they should consider and be patterned after the multidimensional networks that exist naturally among teachers rather than after unidirectional mentoring relationships adopted from business models. Further, these studies suggest that an active informal network of support relationships is identifiable in elementary schools among both male and female teachers, whether or not a formalized mentoring program exists. This may lead us to examine why we invest considerable time and money to formally structure relationships which can occur naturally. This examination is especially valid in a period of economic constraint.

More important, these studies suggest that males and females may need different considerations and resources for support in order to develop healthy, comprehensive support networks in the workplace. A deeper investigation of the roles and types of support provided by individuals of different genders should lead to a better understanding of how to better establish a collaborative workplace in elementary schools; an environment which nobody finds hostile or lonely.

As organizations such as schools create mentoring programs, they need to understand the informal, naturally occurring process of peer support. Understanding how these varied types of support operate and with what results is essential to the professional development, satisfaction, and retention of teachers. In addition, this understanding will enable us to move ahead in establishing school climates that foster informal networking and a collegial community for all teachers, male and female alike.

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Table 1

Factor Loadings for Six-dimensional Factor Solution of Female Teacher Support Behaviors

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
Mentoring (F1)						
Influential person advocates	.65	.10	.15	.15	.01	.17
Taught strategies to influence groups, meetings	.61	.13	-.02	.13	.01	.16
Help juggle personal and professional goals	.61	.34	.01	.10	.12	.02
Receive information on jobs and opportunities	.61	.09	.36	.03	.00	-.21
Higher status other like parent	.60	.20	.03	-.02	.16	.08
Higher status other invites to social gatherings	.57	.14	.07	.16	-.02	.05
Taught informal rules and traditions	.51	.18	.26	-.06	.08	.32
Introduced to influential leaders	.50	-.17	.38	.28	.08	.06
Encouraged toward professional development and excellence	.48	.02	.47	.12	.27	-.14
Model behavior after colleague	.45	.33	.02	.12	.03	.05
Supported and "talked up" to others	.42	.33	.35	.16	-.08	.12
Supporting (F2)						
Share personal problems	.03	.77	.06	.12	.10	.11
Exchange confidences and frustrations	.15	.69	.34	-.07	.03	.16

Table 1, cont.

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
Friendship as well as co-workers	.15	.67	.36	.05	.02	.01
Socialize and vacation together	.25	.59	.11	.15	.05	-.22
Exchange community and school news	.14	.54	.44	-.04	.03	-.02
Defended when criticized	.25	.53	.11	.14	-.05	.24
Colleague devotes extra time	.36	.50	.17	.05	.02	.01
Exchange constructive criticism	.21	.42	.32	.05	.11	-.03
Collaborating (F3)						
Work together to meet student needs	-.01	.14	.70	.09	.07	.10
Work together to solve problems	.04	.30	.68	.09	.05	.17
Share materials and ideas	.14	.38	.67	-.01	.05	-.09
Schedule programs and events together	.15	.24	.57	.20	.03	.19
Receive advice on students, instruction and responsibilities	.41	.18	.47	.05	.32	.08
Receive thanks and positive evaluations	.33	.32	.44	.15	.03	.12
Career Strategizing (F4)						
Nominated for honors or awards	.24	.10	.22	.75	-.03	-.21
Informed of decisions and conflicts	.15	.24	.02	.61	.16	.12
Higher status other placing in important assignments	.26	-.02	.20	.55	.14	.33
Supervising (F5)						
Superior gives unsolicited criticism	-.00	.12	.02	.10	.83	-.09
Superior gives solicited criticism	.22	-.01	.18	.07	.74	.13

Table 1, cont.

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
Grounding (F6)						
Coached about school "politics"	.33	.00	.13	-.03	.02	.62
Taught "ins and outs" to be successful	.54	.09	-.00	.23	.11	.48

Table 2

Factor Loadings for Eight-dimensional Factor Solution of Male Teacher Support Behaviors

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8
Grounding (F1)								
Taught informal rules and traditions	.64	.07	.14	.02	.11	.10	.15	.21
Coached about school "politics"	.61	.05	-.05	.11	.07	.25	.24	-.02
Taught "ins and outs" to be successful	.57	.14	.05	.15	.10	.27	.12	.23
Help juggle personal and professional goals	.56	.31	.08	.26	.20	.02	-.06	-.03
Taught strategies to influence groups, meetings	.54	.19	.13	.15	.15	.12	.11	.25
Receive information on jobs and opportunities	.39	.35	.17	.33	.15	-.01	-.05	.04
Supporting (F2)								
Friendship as well as co-workers	.06	.72	.17	.17	.13	.10	.12	.01
Share personal problems	.23	.69	.11	.06	.00	-.14	.13	.15
Exchange confidences and frustrations	.05	.69	.09	.10	.08	.12	.19	.23
Socialize and vacation together	.33	.53	.16	-.02	.35	-.03	-.16	-.20
Exchange constructive criticism	.26	.50	.21	.17	-.11	.21	.29	-.02
Receive thanks and positive evaluations	.04	.40	.41	.27	.18	.35	.16	.19

Table 2, cont.

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8
Collaborating (F3)								
Work together to meet student needs	.15	.18	.74	.16	-.02	-.01	.06	-.06
Encouraged toward professional development and excellence	-.01	.09	.58	-.00	.26	.20	.11	.26
Work together to solve problems	.02	.15	.57	.14	.09	.22	.26	.00
Schedule programs and events together	.18	.00	.49	.24	.01	-.11	.44	-.08
Receive advice on students, instruction and responsibilities	.28	.22	.48	.08	.17	.31	.03	.26
Peer Mentoring (F4)								
Supported and "talked up" to others	.14	.14	.26	.67	-.01	.13	.19	.19
Colleague devotes extra time	.28	.09	.27	.60	.04	-.16	.08	.30
Nominated for honors or awards	.13	.12	.19	.59	.24	.14	-.08	-.34
Defended when criticized	.07	.27	-.04	.55	.15	.24	.19	.14

Table 2, cont.

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8
Advocating (F5)								
Higher status other invites to social gatherings	.14	.15	.06	.19	.72	.02	.06	.17
Introduced to influential leaders	.42	.08	.30	-.12	.56	.07	-.04	.03
Higher status other placing in important assignments	.26	.08	.10	.13	.52	.22	.38	.14
Influential person advocates	.33	-.09	.13	.36	.50	.10	.11	.36
Supervising (F6)								
Superior gives solicited criticism	.25	-.00	.19	-.02	.13	.75	-.02	.07
Superior gives unsolicited criticism	.20	.02	.14	.12	-.03	.65	.00	-.05
Informed of decisions and conflicts	-.10	.30	-.16	.14	.38	.45	.24	.01
Sharing (F7)								
"Cover" responsibilities for each other	.17	.19	.13	-.02	.10	-.05	.71	-.06
Share materials and ideas	.08	.19	.38	.19	.01	.14	.54	.01
Exchange community and school news	.10	.24	.38	.20	.14	.11	.42	.16

Table 2, cont.

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8
Modelling (F8)								
Model behavior after colleague	.23	.15	.03	.14	.16	.05	-.10	.67
Higher status other like parent	.47	.18	.20	.09	.25	-.07	.04	.57

Table 3

Response Differences Between Female Elementary Teachers Currently With and Without a Supportive Adult Relationship

Factor	Mean	SD	t	p
Mentoring				
Without	2.58	.678	-.765	.0001*
With	3.21	.72		
Supporting				
Without	3.66	.70	-4.89	.0001*
With	4.08	.64		
Collaborating				
Without	3.57	.74	-5.71	.0001*
With	4.06	.60		
Career Strategizing				
Without	2.25	.83	-5.72	.0001*
With	2.82	.91		
Supervising				
Without	2.85	1.05	-2.73	.007
With	3.19	.99		
Grounding				
Without	2.44	.89	-5.16	.0001*
With	2.99	.96		

* significant at p<.001

Table 4

Response Differences Between Female Elementary Teachers With and Without a Supportive Adult Relationship in the Past

Factor	Mean	SD	t	p
Mentoring				
Without	2.46	.70	-7.12	.0001*
With	3.17	.72		
Supporting				
Without	3.60	.79	-3.98	.0002*
With	4.05	.63		
Collaborating				
Without	3.62	.84	-3.64	.0005*
With	4.02	.61		
Career Strategizing				
Without	2.18	.79	-5.52	.0001*
With	2.80	.91		
Supervising				
Without	2.81	1.02	-2.44	.0168
With	3.15	1.00		
Grounding				
Without	2.33	.90	-5.06	.0001*
With	2.97	.96		

*significant at p <.001

Table 5

Response Differences Between Male Elementary Teachers With and Without a Current Supportive Adult Relationship

Factor	Mean	SD	t	p
Grounding				
Without	2.42	.73	-5.62	.0001*
With	3.02	.77		
Supporting				
Without	3.40	.76	-2.70	.0082
With	3.69	.73		
Collaborating				
Without	3.40	.80	-4.72	.0001*
With	3.92	.62		
Peer Mentoring				
Without	2.87	.80	-6.50	.0001*
With	3.61	.73		
Advocating				
Without	2.35	.81	-6.82	.0001*
With	3.18	.91		
Supervising				
Without	2.55	.78	-5.08	.0001*
With	3.14	.87		
Sharing				
Without	3.90	.78	-5.30	.0001*
With	4.21	.63		

Table 5

Response Differences Between Male Elementary Teachers With and Without a Current Supportive Adult Relationship

Factor	Mean	SD	t	p
Modelling				
Without	2.40	.93	-5.30	.0001*
With	3.13	1.08		

*significant at p<.001

Table 6

Response Differences Between Male Elementary Teachers Currently With and Without a Supportive Adult Relationship in the Past

Factor	Mean	SD	t	p
Grounding				
Without	2.45	.76	-4.17	.0001*
With	2.98	.77		
Supporting				
Without	3.58	.60	-0.57	.5688
With	3.64	.76		
Collaborating				
Without	3.44	.81	-3.23	.0023*
With	3.88	.66		
Peer Mentoring				
Without	3.15	.80	-2.68	.0098
With	3.51	.79		
Advocating				
Without	2.42	.84	-4.78	.0001*
With	3.11	.94		
Supervising				
Without	2.66	.88	-2.86	.0060
With	3.08	.87		
Sharing				
Without	3.99	.71	-1.57	.1219
With	4.18	.66		

Table 6

Response Differences Between Male Elementary Teachers Currently With and Without a Supportive Adult Relationship in the Past

Factor	Mean	SD	t	p
Modelling				
Without	2.56	1.03	-2.85	.0061
With	3.06	1.09		

*significant at p<.001